Deconstructing the Aztec human sacrifice

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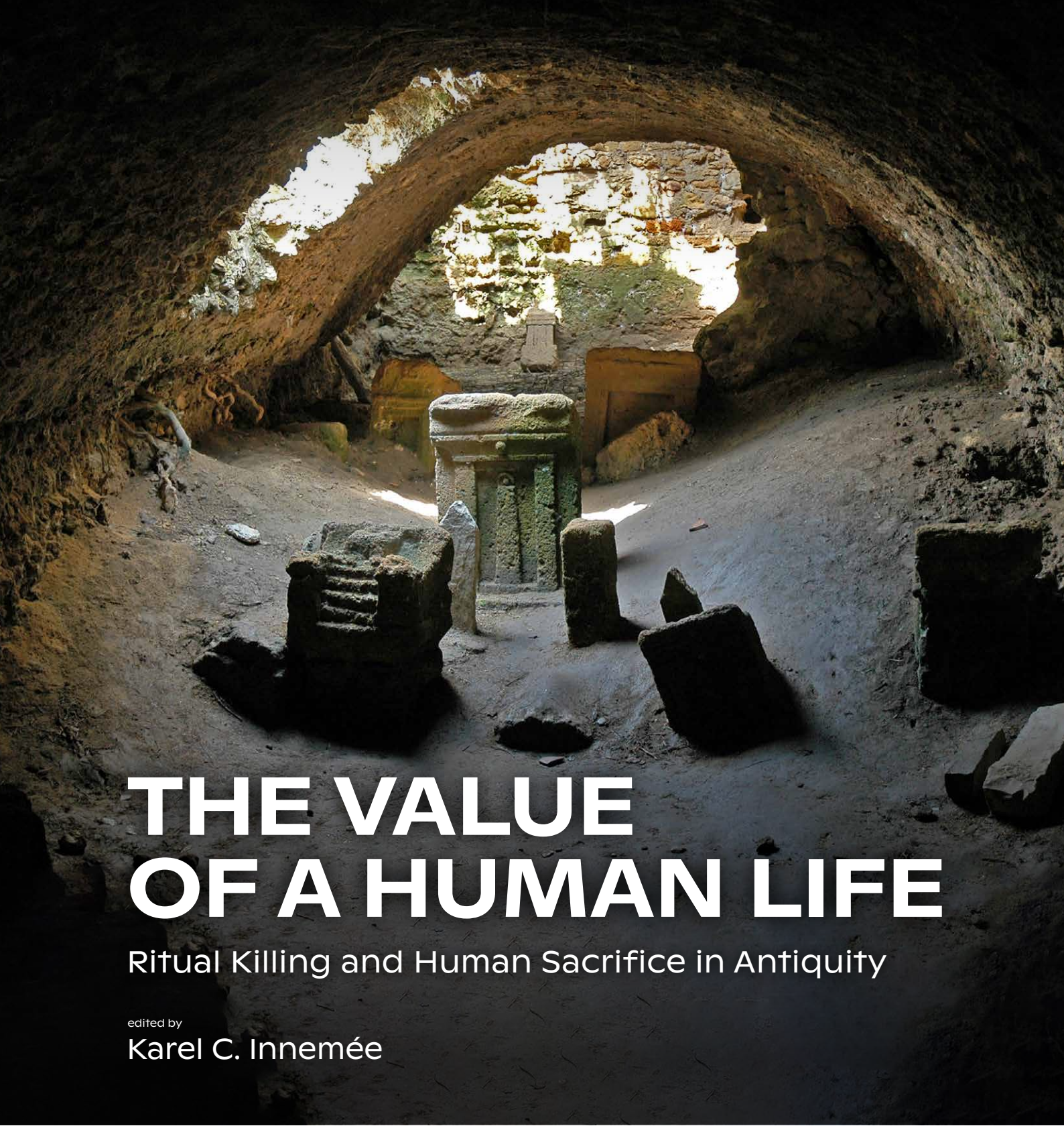

THE VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE

Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in Antiquity

edited by

Karel C. Innemée

PALMA 26

PAPERS ON ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE LEIDEN MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES

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Chapter 7

Deconstructing the Aztec human sacrifice[1]

Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen*

and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez*

7.1. Introduction: colonial sources

Human sacrifice has become emblematically associated with the ancient civilisation of Mexico and Central America, a region also known as Mesoamerica.[2] Particularly the Aztecs, protagonists of the last imperial expansion in that region before the Spanish conquest of 1521, have been portrayed as carrying out sanguinary sacrifices on a daily basis. The custom was reported in abhorrent detail by Spanish authors and explicitly identified as "sacrifice" already in their earliest references. Recalling his first entry in the Aztec capital, one of the conquistadors, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492-1581), writes:

> Respecting the abominable human sacrifices of these people, the following was communicated to us: The breast of the unhappy victim destined to be sacrificed was ripped open with a knife made of sharp flint; the throbbing heart was then torn out, and immediately offered to the idol-god in whose honour the sacrifice had been

1 The present article is a result of the project *'Time in Intercultural Context: the indigenous calendars of Mexico and Guatemala'*, which we have carried out at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University (The Netherlands), together with a team of PhD candidates and postdocs, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) in the context of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 295434. This project builds on the long-term research concerning the interpretation of Mesoamerican visual art and oral tradition, paying special attention to time symbolism, sacred landscape and cultural memory in Central and Southern Mexico (cf. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Time and the Ancestors*).

2 For an overview of the archaeology and history of this region see for example Evans, *Ancient Mexico*. For synthetic studies of Aztec human sacrifice, see Duverger, *Fleur létale, Nájera, Don de Sangre*, and Graulich, *Sacrifice humain.* Anders, Jansen and Reyes García discuss the main points in their book *El Libro del Ciuacoatl* (ch. 8). The volume *El sacrificio humano en la tradición religiosa meso-americana*, edited by Leonardo López Luján and Guilhem Olivier, reviews earlier literature and provides a timely analytic and comparative overview. Compare the contributions by Laura Rival and David Brown to the volume *Sacrifice and Modern Thought*, edited by Meszaros and Zachhuber, and see also Olivier, *Cacería, sacrificio y poder.* Dehouve, *Offrandes et Sacrifices*, analyses sacrifice in the context of ritual deposits, paying attention to cultural continuity.

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Figure 7.1 Colonial representation of Aztec human sacrifice (Codex Magliabechi, 70). After: Anders and Jansen, *Libro de la Vida.*

Figure 7.2 Colonial representation of Aztec cannibalism (Codex Magliabechi, 73). After: Anders and Jansen, *Libro de la Vida.*

> instituted. After this, the head, arms, and legs were cut off and eaten at their banquets, with the exception of the head, which was saved, and hung to a beam appropriated for that purpose.[3]

Similarly another chronicle, written by an unidentified conquistador, describes the ritual in even more detail:

> They take him who has to be sacrificed, and first they carry him through the streets and squares, very finely adorned, with great festivities and rejoicing. Many a one recounts to him his needs, saying that since he is going where his God is, he can tell him so that he may remedy them. Then he gives him refreshments and other things. … They lead him to the temple, where they dance and carry on joyously, and the man about to be sacrificed dances and carries on like the rest. At length the man who offers the sacrifice strips him naked, and leads him at once to the stairway of the tower [pyramid] where is the stone idol. Here they stretch him on his back, tying the hands to the sides and fastening the legs. Then all commence to sing and dance around him, chanting the principal message which he is to bear to the God. Soon comes the sacrificing priest – and this is no small office among them – armed with a stone knife, which cuts like steel, and is as big as one of our large knives. He plunges the knife into the breast, opens it, and tears out the heart hot and palpitating. And this as quickly as one might cross himself. At this point the chief priest of the temple takes it, and anoints the mouth of the principal idol with the blood; then filling his hand with it he flings it towards the sun, or towards some star, if it be night. Then he anoints the mouths of all the other idols of wood and stone, and sprinkles blood on the cornice of the chapel of the principal idol. Afterwards they burn the heart, preserving the ashes as a great relic, and likewise they burn the body of the sacrifice, but these ashes are kept apart from those of the heart in a different vase.[4]

Bernal Díaz and several other sources insist on the connection between human sacrifice and cannibalism: "arms and legs were cut off and eaten at their banquets". This is also the prominent thread in the early colonial accounts by Spanish missionaries, such as the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) or the Dominican friar Diego Durán (ca. 1537-1588), who presented detailed descriptions of Aztec rituals in their "crusade" against the Mesoamerican religion, which they basically saw as the work of the devil.

The practice of human sacrifice was further illustrated in early-colonial (sixteenth century) pictorial manuscripts that continued the pre-colonial pictographic tradition but were produced for the purposes of Christianisation (the "spiritual conquest") and under the supervision of the missionaries. A famous example is the so-called Book of Life (*Libro de la Vida*) or Codex Magliabechi, which shows the stereotypical representation of the human sacrifice: cutting out the heart and throwing the body down the stairs of the temple-pyramid (page 70) while elsewhere (page 73)

3 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 91, 1844, 232-233; English translation by John Ingram Lockhart, published in 1844 and now a Project Gutenberg EBook.

4 Anonymous conqueror, ch. 15, 1917, 51; We cite the 1917 translation by Marshall H. Saville, reproduced by Alec Christensen [http://www.famsi.org/research/christensen/anon_con/section16.htm].

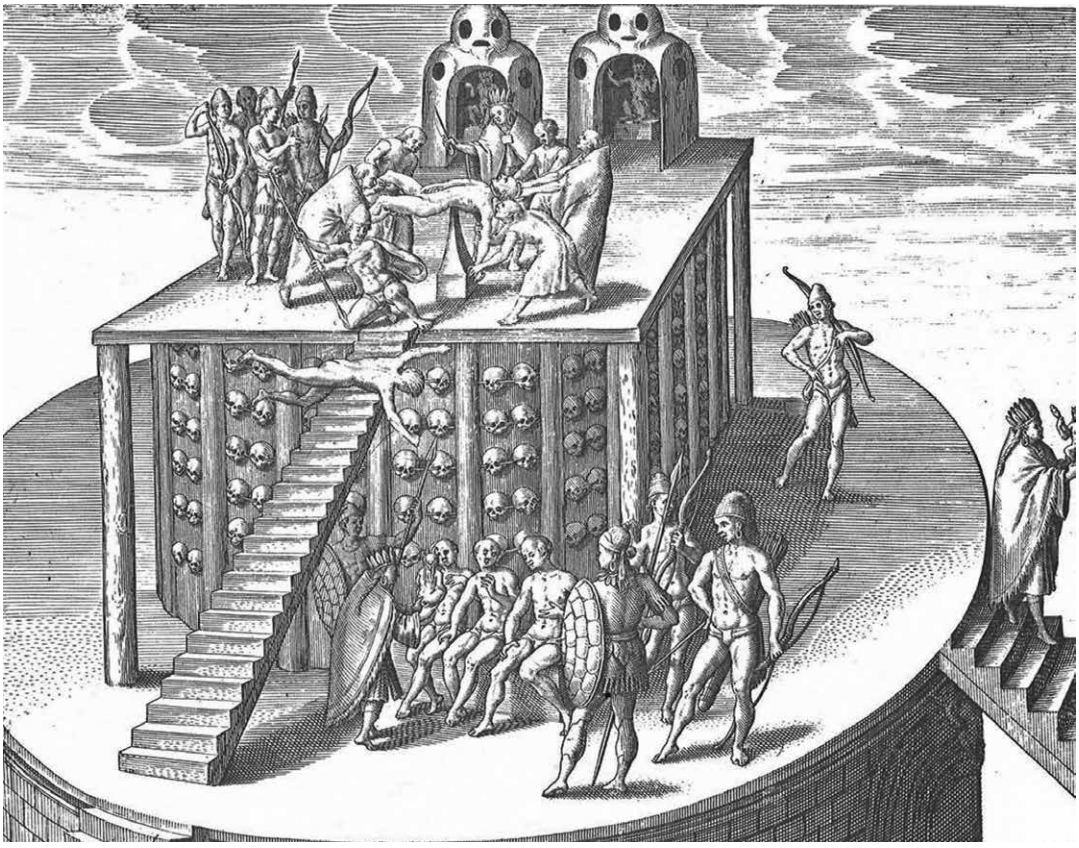

Figure 7.3 De Bry's fanciful rendering of the Aztec main temple. After: De Bry, *Conquistadores, Aztecs and Incas.*

Figure 7.4 De Bry's fanciful rendering of Aztec bloody and cannibalistic rituals. After: De Bry, *Conquistadores, Aztecs and Incas.*

people are sitting in front of the temple eating human flesh (figs. 7.1 and 7.2).[5]

During the same period in Europe the draughtsman Theodore de Bry (Liège 1528 – Frankfurt 1598) produced engravings for editions of chronicles of the Spanish conquest. De Bry himself had never been in the Americas, so his drawings were largely the product of his imagination based on texts, but, as he had a good feeling for the expectations and taste of his audience, his work caused sensation and impact, and profoundly influenced the image of the Aztecs in European perception. Here we see, for example, an image of priests ripping open the belly of a victim on top of a temple platform decorated with human skulls and throwing the corpse down the stairs, and a scene in which the body is flayed and pieces are cut from it to be served at a banquet (figs. 7.3 and 7.4).[6]

Today these descriptions and illustrations are still the basis for popular publications and films such as Mel Gibson's widely debated *Apocalypto* (2006), but they also remain influential in scholarly literature. U.S. anthropologist Marvin Harris, for example, in his widely read book *Cannibals and Kings* (1978) sketched a synthetic image:

> Nowhere else in the world had there developed a state-sponsored religion whose art, architecture and ritual were so thoroughly dominated by violence, decay, death and disease. Nowhere else were walls and plazas of great temples and palaces reserved for such a concentrated display of jaws, fangs, claws, talons, bones and gaping death heads. The eyewitness accounts of Cortes and his fellow conquistador, Bernal Diaz, leave no doubt concerning the ecclesiastical meaning of the dreadful visages portrayed in stone. The Aztec gods ate people. They ate human hearts and they drank human blood. And the declared function of the Aztec priesthood was to provide fresh human hearts and human blood in order to prevent the remorseless deities from becoming angry and crippling, sickening, withering, and burning the whole world.[7]

There are quite a few problems in the records about the Aztec human sacrifice, however. The few Spanish chroniclers who took part in the conquest themselves and were in a position to watch those sacrifices, were still limited in their understanding of Mesoamerican culture: they did not speak the local languages and the translation process was cumbersome. Furthermore, they wrote their texts not as "objective" descriptions but with the clear motive of justifying their (very violent and unjust) enterprise of conquest. The vast majority of the more detailed information does not actually come from eye-witness accounts, but was collected several decades after such practices had become totally prohibited by the Spanish colonial regime.[8] The missionaries who reported these rituals also had ulterior motives, essentially to convince the Spanish authorities in their homeland about the horrible aspects of native "idolatry" and the urgent necessity of sending enough human and material resources for the "spiritual conquest".[9] Enough of a reason to analyse these sources with care and historical critique!

7.2. Cannibals and Witches

The early-colonial sources connected the Aztec human sacrifice intimately to the practice of anthropophagy, which had first and foremost been attributed to the native peoples of the Caribbean and the wider Amazonian region. De Bry visualised cannibalistic banquets in his illustrations of the account of Hans Staden about his stay among the Tupinambá people (Brazil). Following in his footsteps, the Dutch painter Albert Eeckhout (1610-1666) made a famous painting of a native Brazilian woman walking around holding a severed human arm and carrying a basket with human limbs for consumption. The style is so precise and naturalistic that it seems to be a photograph, but one moment of reflection is enough to understand that this is not a realistic image at all: it is highly unlikely that cannibalistic women were wandering around under Dutch colonial rule with its protestant ethics.[10]

In the minds of the colonizers, cannibalism on the Mesoamerican mainland was an expected continuation of macabre practices known from the Caribbean, but even more dramatic as it was combined with the sanguinary act of human sacrifice.

In the framework of proposing a scientific theory about cultural differences, Harris saw the occurrence of human sacrifice among the Aztecs as a function of

5 For a facsimile edition and commentary see Anders and Jansen, *Libro de la Vida*.

6 De Bry, illustrations VIII and IX of the *Idea Vera et Genuina praecipuarum historiarum omnium, ut et variorum rituum, ceremoniarum, consuetudinumque gentis Indicae* (published in Frankfurt 1602), reproduced in De Bry, *Conquistadores, Aztecs and Incas*. On the work of De Bry and its influence on the image of the indigenous peoples and cultures of the Americas, see Bucher, *Icon and Conquest*, and Van Groesen, *Representations*. For an overview of how Aztec culture has been perceived through time, see the classic monograph by Keen, *Aztec Image in Western Thought*. A recent article by Klein, 'Death at the Hand of Strangers', focuses on the Western representation of Aztec human sacrifice.

7 Harris, *Cannibals*, ch. 9, 147-148.

8 For example: Sahagún arrived several years after the conquest (1529) and started the research for his book some thirty years later, while Durán was born in Mexico in ± 1537 and wrote his work in the 1570s.

9 Cf. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Tiempo, Religión, Interculturalidad.*

10 Buvelot, *Eckhout*; cf. Mason, *Infelicities*.

cannibalism and, following suggestions of another anthropologist, Michael Harner, explained the habit of cannibalism by linking it to a supposed absence of protein sources (Harris, *Cannibals*, ch. 10). The subjective reason for procuring these proteins through sacrifice, in Harris' interpretation, would have been the primitive people's fear of "remorseless deities".[11]

Ironically, at the same time, other authors focused on analysing how and why cultural differences were observed, constructed and valued in the first place. In an intellectual context of questioning the motivations behind stereotyping "the Other", epitomized by the critical works of Edward Said and Michel Foucault, the long accepted presence of cannibalism came under scrutiny.

Puerto Rican author Jalil Sued Badillo wrote a ground-breaking cultural-historical analysis *Los Caribes: realidad o fábula* (1978), which questioned the existence of anthropophagy among the Caribs, as the vast majority, if not all, of testimonies seemed to be based on hearsay and misinterpretations of native customs. Human remains found preserved in baskets or vessels, for example, do not indicate that the bodies had been consumed at a banquet, but rather a form of keeping bones of deceased family members in a context of ancestor worship. Similarly the Spaniards interpreted the location of human bodies on a *barbacoa* installation above a fire as "cooking" the body for consumption, while in fact it was a form of drying the body as part of a mummification process.[12] William Arens goes even further in his book with the eloquent title *The Man-Eating Myth: anthropology and anthropophagy* (1979), and questions the existence of cannibalism in human cultures in general. He argues that many reports were inspired by a desire to justify conquest and colonisation (with its cruel, destructive and genocidal character) by representing the "newly discovered" peoples as wild cannibals and consequently as inhuman, even anti-human. In order to "save" them from the devil, they should be brought under European rule, so they could be "civilized" and educated in the "true religion".

The works of Sued Badillo and Arens caused visceral criticism and emotional polemics. Opponents argued that the critique of cannibalism was too superficial and that cannibalism existed, though they admitted that it was probably less frequent than commonly thought, and that where it occurred it was probably part of a much more complicated cultural set of ideas and practices and certainly could not be described adequately as a primitive culinary custom. The whole discussion shows that these books were successful in unmasking a stereotype that until then had remained largely unquestioned.[13]

A number of follow-up studies have indeed made it clear that reports and representations of "other people" are often deeply influenced by all kinds of stereotypes, engrained as pre-understandings in the mind of the colonizers and missionaries as well as in that of their "successors", the modern anthropologists. The basic element in this lack of good intercultural understanding is the tendency of seeing "the Other" as less rational (and therefore less human) than "Self". Thus the religion of "Self" is felt as a profound and comforting spiritual guidance in life, but the religion of "the Other" is typically considered irrational, weird, caused by fear and horror-inspiring.[14]

The first European impressions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas followed cognitive templates already put in place by fanciful (even hoax-like) medieval travel accounts such as the 14th-century book of John Mandeville, who, following Pliny the Elder, described the inhabitants of far-away islands as strange and monstrous creatures.[15] This work, very popular in its time, mentioned instances of human sacrifice and anthropophagy:

> In that country they make idols, half man half ox. And in those idols evil spirits speak and give answer to men of what is asked them. Before these idols men slay their children many times, and spring the blood upon the idols; and so they make their sacrifice.[16]

> And then for the love and in worship of that idol, and for the reverence of the feast, they slay themselves, a two hundred or three hundred persons, with sharp knives, of which they bring the bodies before the idol. And then they say that those be saints, because that they slew themselves of their own good will for love of their idol… they go before the idol leading him that will slay himself for such devotion between them, with great reverence. And he, all naked, hath a full sharp knife in his hand, and he cutteth a great piece

11 See Harner, 'Ecological Basis'. This theory has been elaborated upon by Winkelman ('Aztec Human Sacrifice'), who, applying a cross-cultural analysis, brought to the fore an interplay with factors such as population pressure, societal stratification, and psychocultural dynamics. Following a similar comparative approach, an article in Nature by Watts et al. ('Ritual Human Sacrifice') also examines the possible connection of human sacrifice, the legitimation of authority and the evolution of stratified societies. The problem of developing such general theoretical models, however, is that at this stage the argument is often based on uncertain, debatable and pluri-interpretable data.

12 See Sued Badillo's intelligent and convincing analysis of the source texts (*Los Caribes*, 41-46).

13 See the contributions by Peter Hulme and William Arens in Barker, Hulme and Iversen, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*.

14 See for example Jarich Oosten, 'Prime mover', in Jansen et al., *Continuity and Identity*, as well as Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race*.

15 See on this topic Mason, *Deconstructing America*.

16 Mandeville, *Travels*, ch. 18.

> of his flesh, and casteth it in the face of his idol, saying his orisons, recommending him to his god. And then he smiteth himself and maketh great wounds and deep, here and there, till he fall down dead. And then his friends present his body to the idol.[17]

> But in that country there is a cursed custom, for they eat more gladly man's flesh than any other flesh; and yet is that country abundant of flesh, of fish, of corns, of gold and silver, and of all other goods. Thither go merchants and bring with them children to sell to them of the country, and they buy them. And if they be fat they eat them anon. And if they be lean they feed them till they be fat, and then they eat them. And they say, that it is the best flesh and the sweetest of all the world.[18]

The act of killing and eating children was also attributed by the Catholic inquisitors to "witches", as registered in the infamous persecution manual *Malleus Maleficarum* written by the Dominican monks Heinrich Kramer and Jacobus Sprenger, published only a few years before Columbus' first voyage:

> … the fact that certain witches, against the instinct of human nature, and indeed against the nature of all beasts, with the possible exception of wolves, are in the habit of devouring and eating infant children. And concerning this, the Inquisitor of Como, who has been mentioned before, has told us the following: that he was summoned by the inhabitants of the County of Barby to hold an inquisition, because a certain man had missed his child from its cradle, and finding a congress of women in the night-time, swore that he saw them kill his child and drink its blood and devour it.[19]

We should keep in mind that the European conquest and colonisation of the Americas took place at the same time as the witch-craze in Europe. Treatises against witchcraft such as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or the *Reprovación de las supersticiones y hechizerías* of Pedro Ciruelo (1538) were certainly known to the missionaries and must have had a determining influence on the way in which they saw native religion as "idolatry" and a "pact with the devil". Witches were also a popular stereotypical theme in literature, paintings and engravings.[20]

Nowadays, after much critical research, the scholarly consensus is that "witches" as such – *i.e.* as the created stereotype – did not exist but were a product of the fantasies and fears of their persecutors. This witch-craze caused the torture and death of tens of thousands of innocent victims – in itself it is illustrative that nobody really knows how many, because records have been lost and were not always kept consistently (certainly not in cases where the perpetrators themselves felt that they were actually acting anti-ethically or in a criminal way). On the basis of a collection of inquisition documents Carlo Ginzburg (*Benandanti*, *Storia Notturna*) has analysed the phenomenon in depth, demonstrating how the inquisitors interpreted information about agricultural rites and beliefs (focusing on protection of community and harvest) in accordance with their preconceived image of the witches' Sabbath (cult of the devil) and made local people confess to that.

We should remember that the persecution of indigenous religion (the "spiritual conquest") in the Americas and the persecution of witches in Europe were not only contemporaneous, but were two aspects of the same historical phenomenon, with the same ideology and demonology. In fact, sometimes the protagonists were the same. For example, the first bishop of Mexico, friar Juan de Zumárraga (OFM), had been the leading inquisitor in the persecution campaign against the "witches" of Vizcaya, Spain, in 1527. He was accompanied in this enterprise by friar Andrés de Olmos (OFM), who would later follow him to Mexico and become an important author of a grammar and a vocabulary of the Aztec language. Olmos would even write in the Aztec language a treatise on witchcraft, *Tratado de hechicerías y sortilegios* (1553), which was a translation and adaptation of the *Tratado de las Supersticiones y Hechizerías* (1529) that his confrere Martin de Castañega had written after the experiences of the campaign against the Vizcaya witches.[21] Spanish authors of the 16th Century refer consistently to Mesoamerican Gods as "demons" and to religious practice in terms of witchcraft (*brujería*), and so do many people today: common citizens but also anthropologists.[22]

Taking it for granted that such practices were common in the "New World", and having only a very limited understanding of the people there, the conquistadors and

17 Mandeville, *Travels*, ch. 19, 118.

18 Mandeville, *Travels*, ch. 20, 120.

19 *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question XI

20 See Vervoort and Vanysacker, *Bruegel witches*. An example of a literary and philosophical treatment is the work *Dialogus Strix sive de ludificatione Daemonum* (1523) by Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola (1470-1533). Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, offers a classic evaluation of the phenomenon.

21 See the edition and Spanish translation of Olmos' work by Georges Baudot (1990). Bishop Zumárraga is famous for his role in the appearance of the Virgin of Guadelupe, but he also wrote a *Doctrina Cristiana* (1543); for his relations with the inquisition, see Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*. Cervantes' *Devil in the New World* offers an overview of the cultural-historical context.

22 Cf. Christensen and Martí, *Witchcraft and pre-Columbian Paper*, Madsen and Madsen, *Guide to Mexican Witchcraft*, Nutini and Roberts, *Bloodsucking Witchcraft*. The Mesoamerican landscape is full of places called "*cueva del diablo*" etc.

the missionaries interpreted and represented what they saw of the local customs through this lens. Particularly since the hostile image of the cannibal and idolater was a welcome device to discredit other peoples and consequently deny them human status and rights.[23] The Royal *Cédula* of King Ferdinand of Spain (1511) accused the Caribs of being unwilling to receive the Europeans and of being aggressors who made war on the indigenous population "in our Service", taking them prisoner, killing them, dismembering and eating them and inciting them to commit many evils. Therefore the Royal *Cédula* gave the Spaniards permission to make war on those Caribs, take them prisoner and sell them (as slaves).[24] Undeniably, this was a very strong motive for the conquistadors – determined to usurp indigenous lands and resources – to dismiss the indigenous inhabitants as murderers and man-eaters. It is precisely for this reason that we cannot trust such allegations without further proof. And, as Sued Badillo, Arens and others have pointed out, that proof is conspicuously lacking.

7.3. The European invention of Aztec human sacrifice

Now, as we know that the diverse accusations related to witchcraft and the cult of demons in Europe – concretely the alleged acts of sacrificial killing and cannibalism – were generally false, and that the conquistadors were not only prejudiced and biased, but also had a persuasive self-interest to create such a gory image, how should we consider the descriptions of such matters in Mesoamerica?

As in the case of the anthropophagy attributed to the Caribbean, in the case of Mesoamerica the reports on human sacrifices and related cannibalism are generally written long after the facts and are not trustworthy eyewitness accounts.[25] In order to uncover original observations we must turn to pre-colonial sources, which indeed contain several depictions of the act described by the Spanish authors as "human sacrifice", both in the pre-colonial painted manuscripts and in sculptures: a priest killing a person in front of a deity by cutting out the heart with a flint or obsidian knife. The frequency, scale, time-depth, context, purpose and meaning of these acts, however, are not self-evident.

In Codex Mictlan (Laud), p. 17, for example, we see a priest killing a man on an altar by stabbing a flint knife into his breast (fig. 7.5). This is not a historical action, however, but a way of referring to the title of a priest, who happens to be a participant in a procession leading to a cave, where he will present an offering of firewood.[26]

Figure 7.5 The sacrificing priest in Codex Mictlan (Laud), p. 17. After: Anders and Jansen, *Pintura de la Muerte*.

Some conquistadors claimed to have witnessed such events – or their remains – but the circumstances are generally not clear. They were all children of their time and thus their observations were predetermined and biased by all kinds of imaginations and prejudices about unknown non-Christian "other peoples". Besides, it is obvious that the conquistadors, the missionaries and the colonial officials, all had reasons to promote the image of the cruel barbarian sacrificers and cannibals as a justification for their own military and spiritual conquest.[27]

In 1992 an in-depth critical review of the problematic character of these testimonies appeared: the PhD thesis of Peter Hassler, *Menschenopfer bei den Azteken? Eine quellen- und ideologiekritischer Studie*. Since then, several specialists (such as Elizabeth Graham and Antje Gunsenheimer) have equally presented critical analyses and have noted the need to re-examine the stories about human sacrifices in Mesoamerica, but their observations have not received adequate attention in the mainstream literature.

Here we will try to reconstruct the origin and early development of the now widely accepted image of such practices. An important testimony in this respect comes from Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who participated in the conquest campaign (1518-1521). He started writing

23 For a historical critical review of ideas surrounding the Spanish conquest of Mexico, see Restall, *Seven Myths*. Already the ancient Romans accused the early Christians of killing and eating children during their religious ceremonies (Minucius Felix, Octavius IX, 5, quoted by Widengren *Religionsphänomenologie*, 310).

24 See Jesse, *Spanish Cédula*, for the full text of the document in question.

25 See for example Jacobs, *Cannibalism paradigm.*

26 See the edition and commentary by Anders and Jansen, *Pintura de la Muerte*. We follow the new nomenclature we have proposed for the pre-colonial Mexican codices (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Mixtec Pictorial Manuscripts*).

27 Cf. Bataillon et al., *Teorías de la guerra justa.*

his *Memoirs* in 1568 in order to correct the work of Francisco de Gómara (chaplain of Hernán Cortés), which in his opinion contained many errors and mistakes – an indication of how the Spaniards themselves recognised that the existing reports were far from precise and objective. Although several decades after the facts, Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote a vivid report directly from memory that transports the reader to the places, times and events described. Until now his chronicle has had a determining influence on the way the conquest of Mexico is perceived.[28]

The first references to religious monuments and blood sacrifice appear in the description of the first Spanish incursion into Mexico, the expedition led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba (1517), visiting the coast of Campeche. Bernal Díaz del Castillo writes:

> They [the local people] took us to some large edifices, which were strongly put together, of stone and lime, and had otherwise a good appearance. These were temples, the walls of which were covered with figures representing snakes and all manner of gods. Round about a species of altar we perceived several fresh spots of blood. On some of the idols there were figures like crosses, with other paintings representing groups of Indians. All this astonished us greatly as we had neither seen nor heard, of such things before. It appeared to us that the inhabitants had just been sacrificing some Indians to their gods, to obtain from them the power to overcome us.[29]

Expressions such as "All this astonished us greatly" and "It appeared to us that … " indicate that the Spaniards were not sure what to make of these "fresh spots of blood" and just speculated that they represented some form of sacrifice, probably because of their general expectation pattern (nurtured by Mandeville and similar literature). From the blood itself it is not clear, however, whether humans really had been killed on that occasion or if the blood came from bloodletting or from killed animals. Much more explicit is the next reference:

> We found two houses, which were strongly built of stone and lime; both were ascended by a flight of steps, and surmounted by a species of altar, on which stood several abominable idols, to whom, the previous evening, five Indians had been sacrificed. Their dead bodies still lay there, ripped open, with the arms and legs chopped off, while everything near was besmeared with blood. We contemplated this sight in utter astonishment, and gave this island the name of Isla de Sacrificios.[30]

Thus Bernal Díaz presents himself as personally having witnessed the dead bodies of five persons. The reason for the killing (and for the dismembering) is actually unknown, but the Spaniards immediately supposed that it had been a sacrifice. They even established and commemorated this in naming the place the "Island of Sacrifices".

The Spanish arrival at Isla de Sacrificios has also been described by Juan Díaz, who participated in Grijalva's expedition as chaplain. An Italian translation of his account, entitled 'Itinerario de l'armata del Re Catholico in India verso la isola de Iuchathan del anno MDXVIII', was included as an appendix in the *Itinerario de Ludovico de Varthema Bolognese*, published in Venice with the date 3 March 1520.[31]

> We all went ashore on this small island, which we called the Island of the Sacrifices: … we found some buildings of lime and sand, very large, and a piece of a building also of that material, made in the same way as an ancient arch that stands in Mérida, and another buildings with foundations of the height of two men, ten feet wide and very long; and another tower-shaped building, round, of fifteen paces wide, and on top it had marble like that of Castile, on which was an animal like a lion, also made of marble, which had a hole in the head in which they put the perfumes; and that lion had its tongue out of its mouth, and near it was a vessel of stone with blood, which might have been eight days old, and here were two poles of the height of a man, and among them there were some clothes made of silk similar to the Moorish almaizares; and on the other side there stood an idol with a feather on its head, with its face turned toward the above-mentioned stone, and behind this idol there was a large pile of stones; and between these poles, near the idol, were two dead Indians of young age wrapped in a painted blanket; and behind the cloth were two other dead Indians, who seemed to have been killed three days before, while the before-mentioned other two apparently were already dead for twenty days.
>
> Near these Indians and the idol there were many skulls and bones, and there were also many bundles of pine wood, and some large stones on which they killed the said Indians…

28 For a thorough, critical analysis of these early sources and their influence, see Solis Salcedo, *Sacrifices Humains*.

29 Díaz del Castillo *Memoirs*, ch. 3, 1844, 7.

30 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 13, 1844, 31.

31 Jiménez del Campo, 'Sobre el Itinerario'. The Italian text has been translated back into Spanish and both texts have been published by García Icazbalceta in his *Colección*.

> When the captain and the people had seen this, he wanted to be informed if this had been done as sacrifice, and sent to the ships for an Indian who was from this province, the one who came to where the captain was, he suddenly passed out and fell on the road, thinking that they were taking him [there] to kill him.
>
> Arrived at the mentioned tower the captain asked him, why was such a thing done in that tower, and the Indian replied that it was done as a form of sacrifice; and according to what was understood, they [the local inhabitants] cut the throats of people on that large stone, poured the blood into the vessel, and pulled out the heart from the chest, and burned it and offered it to that idol; they cut off the fleshy parts of the arms and legs and ate them; and that they did with their enemies with whom they were at war.[32]

We notice some interesting differences in these accounts, Bernal Díaz refers to the dismembered bodies of five persons, which (apparently) had been killed the evening before. Juan Díaz describes the place in more detail and mentions a vessel of stone with blood (not specifying whether it was human or animal blood), two youngsters who had already been dead for some twenty days and two others (adults?), who had been dead for three days (so in total four persons). Their bodies were wrapped in cloth and apparently not ripped open. There were also skulls and bones. In referring to the human remains Juan Díaz himself does not clarify the cause or circumstances of their death. But he does tell how the captain had the idea that this represented an act of sacrifice and interrogated a local person about that. The phrase '*according to what was understood*' indicates that communication was problematic. Anyway, the Spaniards got the confirmation of what they suspected: a first description of human sacrifice (offering of the heart to the idol) and cannibalism. One starts wondering how much of their accounts was influenced by this pre-conceived notion.

A little later in his chronicle Bernál Díaz del Castillo gives a somewhat more detailed description of such sacrificial acts, now situated in the harbour town now known as San Juan de Ulua:

> Here we found a temple on which stood the great and abominable-looking god Tetzcatlipuca, surrounded by four Indians, dressed in wide black cloaks, and with flying hair, in the same way as our canons or Dominicans wear it. These were priests, who had that very day sacrificed two boys, whose bodies they had ripped up, and then offered their bleeding hearts to the horrible idol. They were going to perfume us in the same way they had done their gods; and though it smelt like our incense, we would not suffer them, so shocked were we at the sight of the two boys whom they had recently murdered, and disgusted with their abominations. Our captain questioned the Indian Francisco whom we had brought with us from the Bandera stream as to what was meant by all this, for he seemed rather an intelligent person; having, at that time, as I have already stated, no interpreter, our captain put these questions to him by means of signs. Francisco returned for answer that this sacrifice had been ordered by the people of Culua; but, as it was difficult for him to pronounce this latter word, he kept continually saying Olua.[33]

Here Bernal Díaz mentions the name of the deity in question (Tezcatlipoca, the Burning and Smoking Mirror), which he probably introduces in retrospect. The communication was severely limited because of the lack of an interpreter, but he learned the names of indigenous Gods later during his stay in the Aztec capital. Again Bernal Díaz states that he himself saw the ripped up bodies – in this case of two boys. He attributes the killing to the four priests but has not seen the act himself. Interrogation through signs and words made the Spaniards think that the killing was a sacrifice that had happened on the orders of the people of Culua, *i.e.* the Aztecs who would become the main adversary once the expedition of Cortés was under way. All of this happened during an earlier reconnaissance trip that preceded the conquest campaign itself. We may suppose that such accounts coloured the expectations that the Spaniards still in Cuba had about the lands they were soon going to invade in search for gold.

Thus, we find here the beginning of an argument that the human sacrifices were an imposition of the Aztec empire (and therefore not something the local population really wanted to do). Later on, Bernal Díaz will confirm that human sacrifices took place first and foremost and continuously in the Aztec capital (Tenochtitlan) and that the ruler Motecuhzoma, generally known as Moctezuma or also Montezuma, was himself actively involved. We also find here the reference to the sacrifice of children (boys), which was particularly barbarian and in line with the alleged crimes of witches.

Even before describing the Spanish arrival in Tenochtitlan Bernal Díaz (with hindsight) observes the customs and plans of the Aztec monarch:

32 Juan Díaz, in García Icazbalceta, *Colección*.

33 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 14, 1844, 32.

> These [deities] were named Tetzcatlipuca and Huitzilopochtli, the former being the god of hell and the latter the god of war, to whom Motecusuma daily sacrificed some young children, that they might disclose to him what he should do with us. His intention was to take us prisoners if we would not re-embark, and employ some to educate children, while others were to be sacrificed.[34]

The explicit accusation that Motecuhzoma was a murderer of children is connected to a speculation about his intentions, which, however, the Spanish author had no way of knowing. The theme of child sacrifice, which we know from the accusations of Romans against the early Christians and from the inquisitors' accusations against the alleged witches, is elaborated upon in the following statement about an expedition by one of the Spanish captains, Pedro de Alvarado:

> Alvarado, during this expedition, visited some small townships which were subject to a greater one, called, in the Aculhua language, Costatlan. This language is that of Mexico and Motecusuma; and when we speak of persons of Aculhua, we must always understand subjects of his empire. Alvarado nowhere met with any inhabitants, but found sufficient proofs in the temples that boys and full-grown people had very recently been sacrificed; for the altars and walls were covered with drops of fresh blood. The flint knives with which the unfortunate victim's breast is cut open to tear the heart away, and the large stones on which they are sacrificed, still lay in their proper places. Most of the bodies thus seen by our men were without arms or legs, which, according to the accounts of the Indians, had been devoured. Our men were perfectly horror-struck at such barbarities: however, I will not waste another word on the subject, for we found the same thing over again in every district we visited in this country.[35]

Bernal Díaz himself did not participate in Alvarado's expedition but refers to what was "seen by our men" and what had occurred "according to the accounts of the Indians". Actually, Alvarado did not meet the locals but "found sufficient proofs". The sacrificial act is then described in more detail and qualified as "barbarity" which struck the Spaniards with "horror". The latter term sounds somewhat hypocritical if we think of the violent social reality of late medieval Spain.

Then Bernal Díaz stresses that the Spaniards found the same indications of manslaughter throughout the country: "*in every district we visited*". Later he repeats:

> … we marched on until we came to a small township, where a short time previous several human beings had been sacrificed. As the kind reader would be disgusted with hearing of the numbers of male and female Indians we found butchered along every road and in every village we passed through, I will be silent on that head… [36]

Clearly this theme had now become a generalisation, which makes it difficult to tell what and how much the author actually witnessed. At the same time Cortés made it a point to insist that the local rulers had to abandon these sacrifices immediately.

> Cortes desired Doña Marina and Aguilar to acquaint him [the "fat cacique" of Cempoala] how grateful he was for so much kindness, and he had merely to inform him in what way he in return could be of service to him and his people. We were the vassals of the great emperor Charles, who had dominion over many kingdoms and countries, and who had sent us out to redress wrongs wherever we came, punish the bad, and make known his commands that human sacrifices should no longer be continued. To all this was added a good deal about our holy religion. After the fat cazique [local ruler] heard this he sighed deeply, and complained most bitterly about Motecusuma and his governors. It was not long ago that he had been subdued by the former, and robbed of all his golden trinkets. His sway was so excessively oppressive, that he durst not move without his orders; yet no one had sufficient courage to oppose him, as he possessed such vast towns and countries, such numbers of subjects and extensive armies. [37]

Again we see that the local rulers agreed quickly and blamed those bad customs on the oppression of the Aztec empire. The same picture is repeated in the next chapter:

> While the first welcomings were going on it was announced to Cortes that the fat cazique of Sempoalla was approaching in a sedan, supported by numbers of distinguished Indians. Immediately upon his arrival he renewed his complaints against Motecusuma, in which he was joined by the cazique of this township and the other chief personages. He related so much of the cruelties and oppression they had to suffer,

34 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 41, 1844, 95.
35 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 44, 1844, 102.
36 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 44, 1844, 103.
37 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 45, 1844, 105.

> and thereby sobbed and sighed so bitterly that we could not help being affected. At the time when they were subdued, they had already been greatly ill used; Motecusuma then demanded annually a great number of their sons and daughters, a portion of whom were sacrificed to the idols, and the rest were employed in his household and for tilling his grounds. His tax-gatherers took their wives and daughters without any ceremony if they were handsome, merely to satisfy their lusts.[38]

There is no way to prove or disprove this allegation. The Aztec tribute records in Codex Mendoza do not register that persons were rounded up to be sacrificed nor that women were kidnapped.[39] In such tribute records we rather find indications of services, such as weaving or other production activities.[40] It is also plausible that the tribute included local participation in bloodletting rituals and offerings to the Aztec deities. It is only logical that the local rulers would resent the Aztec tribute demands, as well as related religious impositions. But in the Spanish version everything may have become convoluted with a supposed obligation to deliver victims for human sacrifice. Anyway, it must have been clear to the local rulers that Cortés opposed the Aztec regime: this was an aspect they liked about him. Cortés, in turn, interpreted their welcoming reaction as a formal acceptance of Spanish rule.

> The caziques and papas [priests] of Tzinpantzinco, with other inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhood, having witnessed this act of justice, and seeing altogether how friendly Cortes was disposed, and the good deeds which he manifested, were the more susceptible of the things he told them about our holy religion, – respecting the abolishment of their human sacrifices and kidnapping, the discontinuation of other abominations and obscenities, with other matters salutary to their well being. They appeared so well inclined that they assembled the inhabitants of the surrounding districts, and formally declared themselves vassals of the emperor, our master. On this occasion, likewise, numerous complaints were made against Motecusuma, which all terminated with instances of his oppression similar to what we had heard from the Sempoallans and Quiahuitzlans.[41]

Bernal Díaz again stresses the continuous practice of human sacrifice directly related to anthropophagy, always in the same stereotypical manner:

> Indeed, hardly a day passed by that these people did not sacrifice from three to four, and even five Indians, tearing the hearts out of their bodies, to present them to the idols and smear the blood on the walls of the temple. The arms and legs of these unfortunate beings were then cut off and devoured, just in the same way we should fetch meat from a butcher's shop and eat it: indeed I even believe that human flesh is exposed for sale cut up, in their tiangues, or markets.[42]

The addition "I even believe" indicates again that this rather drastic image is to a large extent based on the conquistador's speculation.

This is a crucial moment: it coincides with the redaction of Cortés' first letter (*carta de relación*), which obviously posed the challenge to justify the unjustifiable. As is well known, Cortés and his men had left for Mexico on their own initiative, without proper authorisation. They were now getting involved in nothing less than a full military attack on another country. As the realm they were invading was clearly a well-developed urban state, much richer in gold, art and resources than the Antilles, such an unprovoked aggression was bound to produce even more public and intellectual criticism (and problems for the Majesties' conscience) than the Spanish annexation and ruthless exploitation of the Antillean islands. In 1511, in a famous political sermon on Hispaniola, the Dominican friar Antonio de Montesinos had openly criticized the right of the Spaniards to conquer these lands and enslave and oppress its population. This led to soul-searching of the king and to the promulgation of the Laws of Burgos (1512), which in theory would recognise some minimal rights of the native inhabitants.

This critical milieu must have caused some serious headaches to Cortés in drafting his letters to the Royal Majesties. How to justify his position – and that of the Spanish authorities themselves? In the case of the Antilles the allegation of cannibalism had proved to be an excellent argument for making Spanish interference acceptable, so it could be used again in the case of the Aztec empire, but it might seem somewhat overused and certainly needed some expansion and reinforcement. Cortés found the following solution: connecting cannibalism to an even more dramatic and horrifying sign of diabolic presence: the human sacrifice. In his first letter he made the following argument:

38 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 46, 1844, 107.

39 Clark, *Codex Mendoza*.

40 See for example the manuscript of Tecomaxtlahuaca (Jansen, *Gran Familia*, ch. 2) or the Codex of Yanhuitlan (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Mixtec Pictorial Manuscripts*, ch. 10).

41 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 51, 1844, 118.

42 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 51, 1844, 119-112.

> They have another custom, horrible, and abominable, and deserving punishment, and which we have never before seen in any other place, and it is this, that, as often as they have anything to ask of their idols, in order that their petition may be more acceptable, they take many boys or girls, and even grown men and women, and in the presence of those idols they open their breasts, while they are alive, and take out the hearts and entrails, and bum the said entrails and hearts before the idols, offer that smoke in sacrifice to them.
>
> Some of us who have seen this say that it is the most terrible and frightful thing to behold that has ever been seen. So frequently, and so often do these Indians do this, according to our information, and partly by what we have seen in the short time we are in this country, that no year passes in which they do not kill and sacrifice fifty souls in each mosque [temple]; and this is practised, and held as customary, from the Isle of Cozumel to the country in which we are now settled. Your Majesties may rest assured that, according to the size of the land, which to us seems very considerable, and the many mosques which they have, there is no year, as far as we have until now discovered and seen, when they do not kill and sacrifice in this manner some three or four thousand souls.
>
> Now let Your Royal Highnesses consider if they ought not to prevent so great an evil and crime, and certainly God, Our Lord, will be well pleased, if, through the command of Your Royal Highnesses, these peoples should be initiated and instructed in our Very Holy Catholic Faith, and the devotion, faith, and hope, which they have in their idols, be transferred to the Divine Omnipotence of God; because it is certain, that, if they served God with the same faith, and fervour, and diligence, they would surely work miracles.[43]

In other words, it was Divine Providence that justified and dictated the conquest: the Catholic majesties were called upon by God himself to combat the influence of the devil and therefore just had to take over (invade and conquer) the "newly discovered" lands. At the same time, by attributing this custom to the Aztec domination Cortés further constructed the idea of an "evil empire" against which all (in principle "good") subject communities wanted to rebel: they were just waiting for the Spaniards to "liberate" them. Cortés involved his whole army of conquistadors in this complot:

> Cortes spoke a long time to us upon the subject; he brought many holy and useful lessons to our mind, and observed that we could do nothing which would be more beneficial to this people, and more to the glory of God, than to abolish this idolatry with its human sacrifices.[44]

The fact that he needed such a long speech, suggests that Cortés indeed had to inculcate in his men a specific vision of the surrounding world and their "mission". It is here, we suspect, that the notion of the human sacrifice was fully developed as the essential justification and motivation for the conquest of the Aztec empire. Logically from now on the prohibition of these sacrifices becomes a recurrent topic in Cortés' rhetoric:

> Doña Marina and Aguilar [the interpreters] told the inhabitants a good deal about our holy religion, and how we were subjects of the emperor Don Carlos the Fifth, who sent us out to bring them back from kidnapping and sacrificing human beings.[45]

The conquistadors understood that the political dimension of their success depended completely on the vision / representation of the "Other", *i.e.* the Aztecs, as inhuman barbarians who indulged in sacrificing people to the demons and in eating them. Simultaneously Cortés used the human sacrifice as a threat to manipulate and convince his men to participate in the act of war, which now had become inevitable. The argument was extra attractive as it also motivated the Spaniards to be alert and fight well in order not to fall victim to that horrible sacrifice themselves.

> They had calculated, he [Cortés] said [to his troops], that we had already lost fifty-five of our men since our departure from Cuba. Neither did we know how matters stood with our garrison at Vera Cruz. Though the Almighty had everywhere granted us victory, it was merely out of the abundance of his mercy towards us. It was not right to calculate too long upon his mercy and forbearance, for that would be tempting him. The pitcher goes to the well until it is broken, and one morning or other we should undoubtedly be sacrificed to the idols.[46]

The rulers of Tlaxcala, a state that had been able to defend itself successfully against Aztec expansion, were probably informed beforehand of the Spanish antagonism towards the Aztecs. Having a common enemy, they welcomed the

43 Cortés, *First letter*, 1908: 163-164; We quote the English translation by Francis Augustus MacNutt (1908).

44 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 51, 1844, 120.

45 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 61, 1844, 139.

46 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 69.

Spaniards with open arms. Cortés repeated his position in order to win this people as an ally:

> Cortes answered, by means of our interpreters, that he was desirous of making peace, not war, which he had already made known to them. He was come into their country to beg of them, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of our great emperor Don Carlos, to abstain from human sacrifices. We were all human beings made of flesh and bone like themselves, and not teules [deities], but Christians. We killed no one, excepting when we were attacked, then, indeed, we destroyed our enemies, whether it happened to be day or night.[47]

Bernal Díaz repeatedly quotes Cortés speaking in similar terms to the local rulers (caciques) – and of course also to his own emperor and home front:

> I have no other reason than that I am bound first to fulfil my duty to the God whom we adore, and to the emperor our master, which is to require of you to abolish your idols, the human sacrifices, and other abominations practised among you, and exhort you to believe in him in whom we believe, who alone is the true God.[48]

The Spanish position is then connected with a promise of benefits. Choosing for or against the Spaniards becomes an existential and ethical choice between good and evil, heaven and hell:

> They [the local lords] must abandon their horrible idols, and believe in the Lord God whom we adore. They would soon discover the beneficial effect of this; blessings would be showered down upon them, the seasons would be fruitful, and all their undertakings would prosper; after death their souls would be transplanted to heaven, and partake of eternal glory; for, by the human sacrifices which they made to their idols, who were nothing but devils, they would be led to hell, where eternal fire would torment their souls.[49]

Arriving in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, Cortés made the same point to Motecuhzoma. Bernal Díaz suspected that human flesh – that of young children – must have been served at the banquets of that monarch:

> Above 300 kinds of dishes were served up for Motecusuma's dinner from his kitchen, underneath which were placed pans of porcelain filled with fire, to keep them warm. Three hundred dishes of various kinds were served up for him alone, and above 1000 for the persons in waiting. He sometimes, but very seldom, accompanied by the chief officers of his household, ordered the dinner himself, and desired that the best dishes and various kinds of birds should be called over to him. We were told that the flesh of young children, as a very dainty bit, was also set before him sometimes by way of a relish. Whether there was any truth in this we could not possibly discover; on account of the great variety of dishes, consisting in fowls, turkeys, pheasants, partridges, quails, tame and wild geese, venison, musk swine, pigeons, hares, rabbits, and of numerous other birds and beasts; besides which there were various other kinds of provisions, indeed it would have been no easy task to call them all over by name. This I know, however, for certain, that after Cortes had reproached him for the human sacrifices and the eating of human flesh, he issued orders that no dishes of that nature should again be brought to his table.[50]

There is no way of telling if what was told to the Spaniards about human flesh being served was a reality or rather a misunderstanding or even a joke. The conquistador recognises this explicitly. Anyway, a text like this illustrates that in principle there was no lack of protein in Mesoamerica.

In the ceremonial centre of Tenochtitlan the issue of human sacrifice came up again, of course. Bernal Díaz reports several details. Speaking about the Templo Mayor:

> Around Huitzilopochtli's neck were figures representing human faces and hearts made of gold and silver, and decorated with blue stones. In front of him stood several perfuming pans with copal, the incense of the country; also the hearts of three Indians, who had that day been slaughtered, were now consuming before him as a burnt-offering. Every wall of this chapel and the whole floor had become almost black with human blood, and the stench was abominable…
>
> This platform was altogether covered with a variety of hellish objects, – large and small trumpets, huge slaughtering knives, and burnt hearts of Indians who had been sacrificed: everything clotted with coagulated blood, cursed to the sight, and creating

47 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 70, 1844, 166
48 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 77, 1844, 180.
49 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 77, 1844, 181.
50 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 91, 1844, 229.

> horror in the mind. Besides all this, the stench was everywhere so abominable that we scarcely knew how soon to get away from this spot of horrors.[51]

> I cannot, however, pass by in silence a kind of small tower standing in its immediate vicinity, likewise containing idols. I should term it a temple of hell; for at one of its doors stood an open-mouthed dragon armed with huge teeth, resembling a dragon of the infernal regions, the devourer of souls. There also stood near this same door other figures resembling devils and serpents, and not far from this an altar encrusted with blood grown black, and some that had recently been spilt. In a building adjoining this we perceived a quantity of dishes and basins, of various shapes. These were filled with water and served to cook the flesh in of the unfortunate beings who had been sacrificed; which flesh was eaten by the papas. Near to the altar were lying several daggers, and wooden blocks similar to those used by our butchers for hacking meat on.[52]

The serpent in Mesoamerican art is a symbol of the liminal sphere in which the deities dwell. For the Spaniards, however, the use of this image was proof that the devil was present in all of this. Again we note: the conquistador just sees vessels in a temple, but thinks they serve for cooking flesh. Similarly he sees knives and wooden blocks and understands them as butchers' knives, in this context as knives for making human sacrifices.

According to Bernal Díaz, the religious difference was the central cause of distancing between Motecuhzoma and Cortés. When both visited the Templo Mayor, Cortés again brought up the subject, but:

> Motecusuma knew what the image of the Virgin Mary was, yet he was very much displeased with Cortes' offer, and replied, in presence of two papas, whose anger was not less conspicuous, 'Malinche, could I have conjectured that you would have used such reviling language as you have just done, I would certainly not have shown you my gods. In our eyes these are good divinities: they preserve our lives, give us nourishment, water, and good harvests, healthy and growing weather, and victory whenever we pray to them for it. Therefore we offer up our prayers to them, and make them sacrifices. I earnestly beg of you not to say another word to insult the profound veneration in which we hold these gods'.[53]

The issue became the ground for Cortés' daring action to overtake the temple and later to take Motecuhzoma prisoner:

> Thus determined, Cortes, accompanied by seven officers and soldiers, repaired to Motecusuma, and spoke to him as follows: 'Great monarch, I have already so many times begged of you to abolish those false idols by whom you are so terribly deluded, and no longer to sacrifice human beings to them; and yet these abominations are continued daily: I have, therefore, come to you now, with these officers, to beg permission of you to take away these idols from the temple, and place in their stead the holy Virgin and the cross. The whole of my men feel determined to pull down your idols, even should you be averse to it; and you may well suppose that one or other of your papas will become the victim'.[54]

Cortés effectively took Motecuhzoma prisoner and argued several times with him to give up his sacrifices, but without success:

> Motecusuma readily agreed to this, as he did in everything else we desired, save the sacrificing of human beings, which nothing could induce him to abolish; day after day were those abominations committed: Cortes remonstrated with him in every possible way, but with so little effect, that at last he deemed it proper to take some decided step in the matter. But the great difficulty was to adopt a measure by which neither the inhabitants nor the priesthood would be induced to rise up in arms. We, however, came to the determination, in a meeting called for the purpose, to throw down the idols from the top of Huitzilopochtli's temple; and should the Mexicans rise up in arms for their defence, then to content ourselves by demanding permission to build an altar on one side of the platform, and erect thereon the image of the holy Virgin with the cross.[55]

In his second letter, directed to the King of Spain (Charles V), Cortés also reports how he immediately banned the sacrifices in the Aztec capital and realm:

> Montezuma and many chiefs of the city remained with me until the idols were taken away and the chapels cleansed, and the images put up, and they all wore happy faces. I forbade them to sacrifice human beings to the idols, as they were accustomed to do, for besides its being very hateful to God, Your Majesty had

51 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 92, 1844, 239-240.
52 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 92, 1844, 242.
53 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 92, 1844, 240.
54 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 107, 1844, 285.
55 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 107, 1844, 284-285.

> also prohibited it by your laws, and commanded that those who killed should be put to death. Henceforth they abolished it, and, in all the time I remained in the city, never again were they seen to sacrifice any human creature.[56]

This last phrase ("y en todo el tiempo que yo estuve en la dicha ciudad, nunca se vio matar ni sacrificar criatura alguna") is illuminating. Cortés not only used the human sacrifice as justification, but also anticipated the absence of evidence that was going to be observed later, by explaining that all traces had been removed precisely because of his – Cortés' – pious dedication to the good cause and his drastic and effective prohibition of this practice!

When we combine all these testimonies stemming from memories of the first hour, we come to the following reconstruction. Texts such as the book about the travels of John of Mandeville and the *Malleus Maleficarum* had prepared the Spaniards to expect that the peoples in that exotic land were likely to indulge in cannibalism and bloody sacrifice. When they found remains of persons that had been killed in a temple they interpreted that as evidence for anthropophagy, and, as those bodies were lying in front of "idols", they interpreted the killing itself as a human sacrifice, *i.e.* an act that purely served to venerate and feed the "demons". The Spaniards needed very little to confirm their pre-understandings, stemming from previous fanciful literature: they simply saw their suspicions fulfilled and were furthermore motivated to see things this way because of the colonial propaganda of their leaders. They did not try to obtain additional information from the locals in order to understand the sacrifice as such but only to find out who had ordered such a horrible act. From the difficult communications (by signs and through two interpreters) the Spaniards gathered that the culprits were the Culhua, *i.e.* the Aztecs. Cortés declared the human sacrifice in combination with cannibalism as the main reason and fundament for the enterprise of conquest. This resulted in a general tacit understanding of all conquistadors – and of the Spaniards who arrived after them – that they had to emphasize those practices as an integral part of the ancient Mexican culture, in order to legitimise the oppression and elimination of that culture.

This analysis concurs with the statement of friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, who already observed that the Spanish stories about human sacrifices were fabrications in order to excuse, *i.e.* justify, the crimes of the conquistadors themselves:

> As for this allegation that they sacrificed humans and ate them, as Gómara says, I believe that there is no truth in it, because in that realm of Yucatán I always heard that there were no human sacrifices, nor was it known what it was to eat human flesh, and the statement of Gómara, who did not see nor hear it, but got it from the mouth of Cortés, his master, who maintained him, has little authority, as it is in his favour and an excuse for his crimes; this is from the talk of the Spaniards and from those who wrote down their horrible deeds, to defame all these nations to excuse the violence, cruelties, robberies and massacres that they have perpetrated, and that every day and even today they continue to do.[57]

7.4. Missionary elaborations

Our main written source on the Aztec world is the work of the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who arrived in "New Spain" in 1529, some eight years after the consummation of the conquest. He started his formal research for this work some thirty years after his arrival and the completion of two successive versions (known as the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex* or *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* respectively) took him some twenty-five years. This encyclopaedic work is written in the Aztec language (Nahuatl), which gives it a unique importance and flavour of authenticity, the reason that he is often hailed as the father of Mexican ethnography. Indeed it records many traditional data, customs and ideas. But in composing this book, Sahagún was mainly assisted by young members of the native nobility that were already converted to Catholicism and were strongly committed to the new religion (connected to the ideology of the colonizers).[58] By the time the Franciscan friar started this project, the conviction that the pre-colonial culture included a lot of human sacrifice and cannibalism had become engrained

56 Cortés, *Second letter,* 1908, 261-262.

57 Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, vol. III, cap. 117, 427, cited by Hassler, 108. This testimony is relevant because Las Casas based this statement on his personal acquaintance with the Maya people. In his work *Apologética Historia* he recognised the existence of human sacrifice among the Aztecs, probably because he followed and transcribed the descriptions by the Franciscan friar Toribio de Benavente Motolinia (Silva Tena, 'Sacrificio Humano'). Las Casas tried to rationalise and justify that form of sacrifice by pointing towards the wide distribution of this practice among many of the world's cultures and to the freedom of conscience (Zuluaga Hoyos, 'Discusión sobre el Canibalismo'; Lantigua, 'Religion within the Limits').

58 We agree with Restall, who in his erudite and innovative book *When Montezuma met Cortés* offers a critical view of Sahagún's work as a "quasi indigenous source", which "was misleadingly read for most of the twentieth century as an authentic Aztec or even "Indian" view of the Conquest".

in everyone's mind and kept everybody under its dramatic spell. Later Spanish interviews with indigenous Mesoamerican religious specialists continued to suffer from the complexities and difficulties of intercultural communication. If some indigenous elder dared to contradict this mainstream image in conversation, he would run the risk of being considered a sympathizer with pre-colonial (evil) paganism, a dissident in denial, so he would probably prefer to keep silent.

Moreover we find some indications that the Franciscan friar consciously misrepresented the facts. For example the first version of Sahagún's work, the *Primeros Memoriales*, summarises how during the month of *Cuauitleua* offerings were made to the Rain Gods: "the children died – they were called *tlacateteuhmê* – there on the mountain tops".[59] The term *tlacateteuhmê* (singular: *tlaca-teteuitl*) refers to anthropomorphic figures cut out of native paper (*amate*). We understand this by studying the ongoing traditional practice in the Sierra de Puebla, e.g. in the Hñahñu (Otomí) village of San Pablito near Pahuatlan: images of plant spirits or other deities are cut out of *amate* paper for agricultural rituals or curing ceremonies (fig. 7.6).[60]

In other words the so-called "children" were paper figures, which "died", *i.e.* were offered and ceremonially disposed of. But the final version of Sahagún's work, the *Florentine Codex*, gives a much more explicitly bloody and sensational image of the *Cuauitleua* feast:

> In this month they slew many children; they sacrificed them in many places upon the mountain tops, tearing from them their hearts, in honor of the gods of water, so that these might give them water or rain. The children whom they slew they decked in rich finery to take them to be killed; and they carried them in litters upon their shoulders… When they took the children to be slain, if they wept and shed many tears, those who carried them rejoiced, for they took it as an omen that they would have much rain that year.[61]

It is clear what happened: the first version describes a local tradition in which paper figures were used as offerings. Sahagún's aim was to convince the Spanish king of the awful and inhuman character of the Mesoamerican religion, so that he would send more (preferably Franciscan) missionaries to combat the persistence of the "idolatry". In the final version, therefore, he and his co-workers made the text

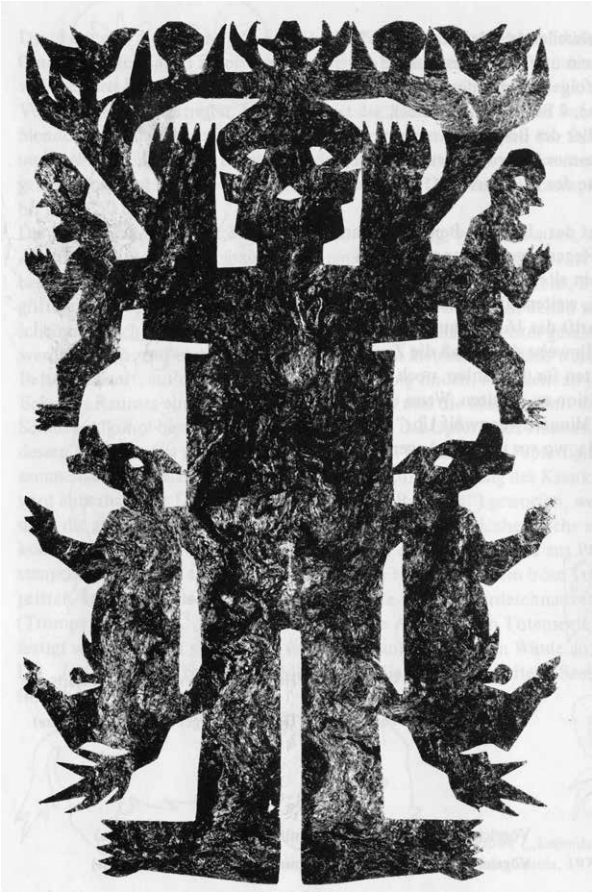

Figure 7.6 Contemporary paper figure of the Lord of the Mountain.

into a dramatically "embellished" testimony of the murder of innocent children to honour the pagan gods. In this way, Mesoamerican religion would be perceived as just another variant of the demonic practices of witches (to whom the *Malleus Maleficarum* also attributed the killing of children).

In a similar vein the Franciscan friar Juan de Torquemada (ca. 1562-1624) describes in his *Monarquía Indiana* (Book 2) that the plaster of the temple of Quetzalcoatl in Cholula consisted of chalk mixed with the blood of young children (of two or three years old), which had been sacrificed for this purpose.[62] Torquemada wrote his monumental work at the beginning of the 17th Century – needless to say: completely out of touch with the pre-colonial building techniques. Most likely this is a sensationalist misinterpretation of the red painted plaster that was widely used in Mesoamerica – abundantly present, for example, in Teotihuacan.

59 Jiménez Moreno, *Primeros Memoriales*, 19.

60 Jansen and Leyenaar, *Amate-geesten*. Cf. Christensen and Martí, *Witchcraft*; Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*. Sahagún himself mentions the ritual use of paper-cut figures in the *Florentine Codex* (Book IX, ch. 3).

61 Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book II, ch.1; Cf. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Mixtec Pictorial Manuscripts*, 269-270.

62 Torquemada mentions this idea in the context of the attack on the Spanish conquistadors when they passed through Cholula – see also McCafferty, *Cholula Massacre*.

Figure 7.7 The sacrifice of a Tree Spirit in front of the Temple of Heaven (inside which priests perform a bloodletting ritual), in Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), p. 33. After: Anders, Jansen and Reyes García, *Templos del Cielo*.

Figure 7.8 The colonial representation of the inauguration of the Aztec main temple (Codex Telleriano-Remensis, p. 39). After: Quiñones Keber, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*.

Sahagún does inform us that the Aztecs also sacrificed (indeed: "beheaded" and "killed") images of paste or dough. This may have led to a metaphoric use of sacrificial terminology also in other cases, which, however, in little-informed and biased descriptions from an outsider perspective, all became qualified as real bloody sacrifice.[63]

The same interpretive challenge can still be experienced today when studying enigmatic scenes in pre-colonial religious manuscripts. A fascinating example is the central chapter (the "Temple Scenes") of Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), 29-47.[64] Here we find many ritual elements, which would be categorized as "objects" in western thought, represented as animated beings. For example, on page 30 we see Trees represented as Spirits (in a way that is comparable to the paper figures of San Pablito that represent Plant Spirits). On pages 33-34 priests sacrifice a Tree Spirit in front of the Temple of Heaven (fig. 7.7). Probably what is meant is the cutting and chopping of wood for the kindling of the (new) fire in the temple and for the meals that have to be prepared for the participants in the rituals. Still today, people in the Mixtec region after cutting a tree will put a stone on the trunk to keep the heart (life) inside.

In filling in the image of ancient human sacrifice, the various colonial authors outrivaled each other in giving high numbers of persons killed and eaten. Modern authors generally place less emphasis on the cannibalistic aspect and consider the amount of victims "exaggerated" (as these are indeed unrealistic). The term "exaggeration" is actually not an apt one because it would imply that the colonial authors had some notion of the real number, while in fact, the large majority of them had never been present at those acts, had never seen the victims and thus could not have been able to count them! So we should not treat these numbers as historical facts, not even as exaggerated ones, but as *imaginations* that were part of colonial propaganda.

We can reconstruct the procedure taking as an example the inauguration of the extension and renewal of the Main Temple (Templo Mayor) in the Year 8 Reed (1487 CE). The early-colonial sources give different numbers of individuals sacrificed on that occasion. Friar Diego Durán, for example, speaks of 80,400 victims, which sounds quite impossible when we think of the practical conditions and the time needed. Obviously, no Spaniards had been present on that occasion and only a few indigenous eyewitnesses would have still been alive in the mid 16th century.

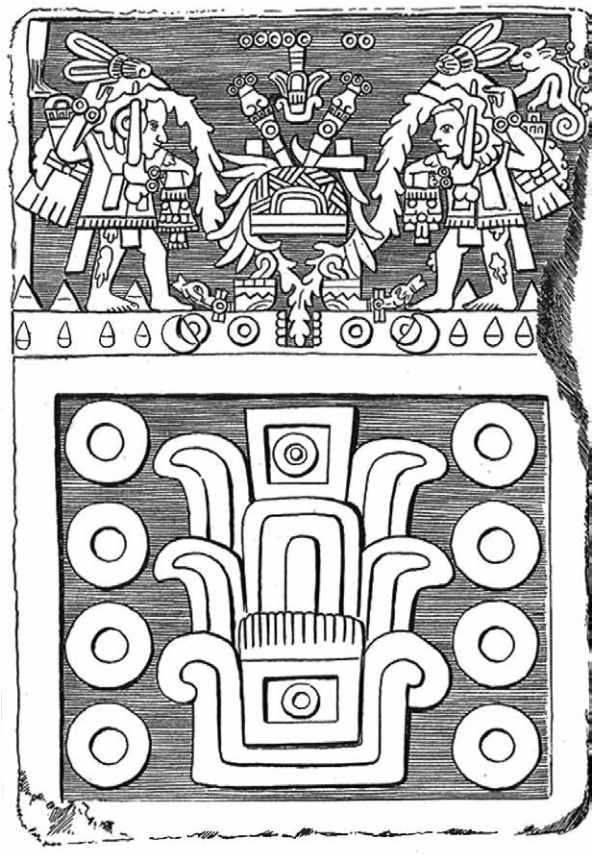

Figure 7.9 The Dedication Stone of the Aztec main temple. After: Seler, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*.

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis and its later copy Codex Vaticanus A depict the event.[65] The Spanish commentary of Codex Telleriano-Remensis, p. 39, says that in the year 1487 the construction or rather enlargement of the Templo Mayor of Mexico was finished and that the old men say that 4000 men were sacrificed in that year, assembled from the provinces that had been subjugated through war. The corresponding pictorial text (fig. 7.8) shows the new fire that was kindled in the Templo Mayor and the presence of the Aztec ruler Ahuizotl and three men approaching. The ethnic identity of these three men is registered in the painting by specific signs accompanying them: Mazatecs (identified by the head of a deer, standing for *mazatl*, "deer") combined with the people of Xiuhcoac ("Place of the Turquoise Serpent"), as well as Tlapanecs (from Tlapa, "Red Place") and Zapotecs (identified by a *zapote* tree). All three are attired with white down-balls

63 Jiménez Moreno, *Primeros Memoriales*, 58.

64 See Anders, Jansen and Reyes García, *Templos del Cielo* and our new interpretation of the chapter in question (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Time and the Ancestors,* 431-530).

65 For an edition of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis with commentary see the publication by Quiñones Keber (1995). For the Codex Vaticanus A see the edition and commentary by Anders and Jansen (1996).

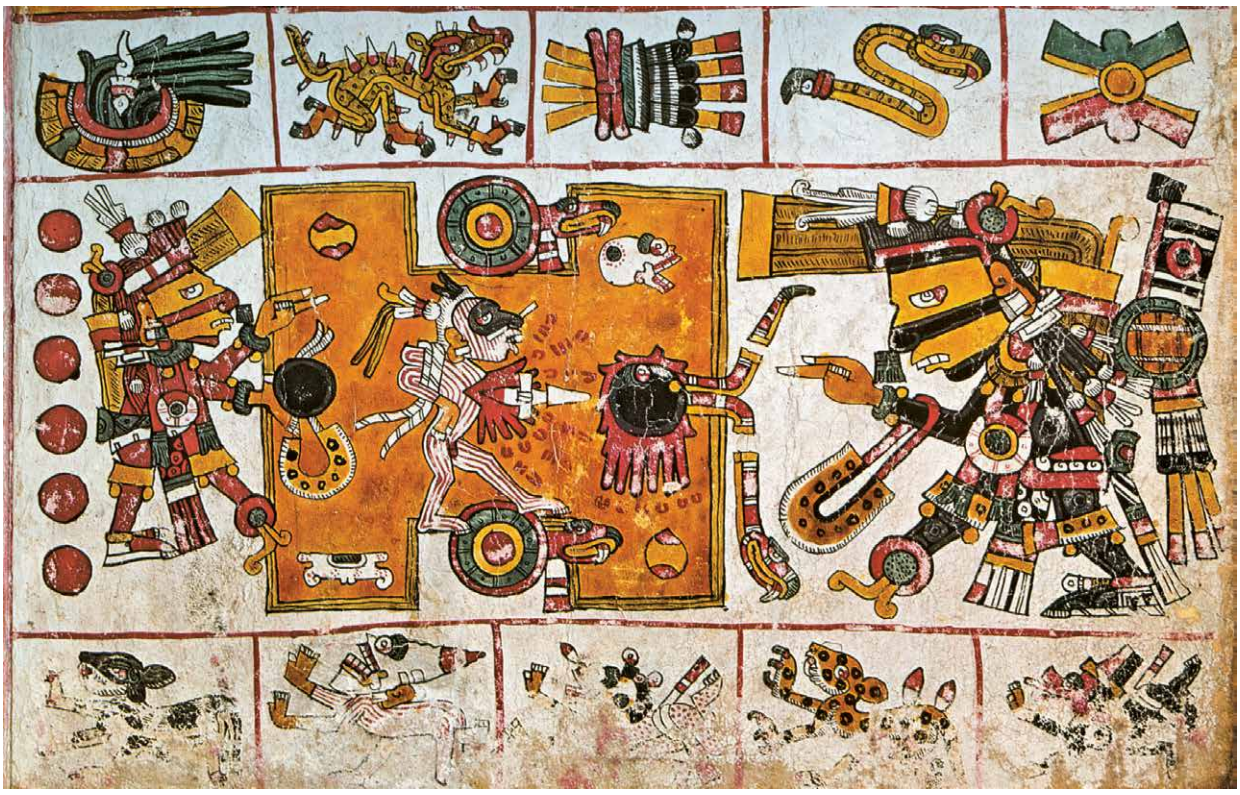

Figure 7.10 A bad time for playing ball, according to Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), p. 21.

on the head and a vertical black band through the eye, while holding a white banner. These signs are indeed associated with ritualised killing.[66] Next to these men is a number. Ten hair-like signs, each of which stands for 400 (*tzontli* is "hair" and "400"), represents a quantity of 4,000 in total (as read in the Spanish text). Added to that are two incense bags (*xiquimilli*), each standing for the number 8,000, making a total of 2 x 8,000 + 4,000 = 20,000. So, reading the Spanish and the pictorial text together, one might conclude that this source indicates that 20,000 Mazatecs, Xiuhcoac people, Tlapanecs and Zapotecs were sacrificed at the inauguration of the Templo Mayor.

Interestingly, there is a stone monument dating from the event itself: the so-called Dedication or Inaugural Stone from the Aztec Templo Mayor (fig. 7.9).[67] It contains the Year 8 Reed (which corresponds to 1487) and a scene in which the Aztec rulers Tizoc and Ahuitzotl are shown offering their blood in self-sacrifice to Earth. Both are identified by their name signs: the perforated leg is to be read as Tizoc, whose name means "He who perforates (in autosacrifice)", including a phonetic complement *xo(tl)*, "leg", and the water animal is read as *ahuizotl*.

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis clarifies that Tizoc had died in the previous year, 7 Rabbit (1486), by presenting a painting of his mortuary bundle with a corresponding explanatory alphabetic text. It was his successor Ahuizotl who in the next year inaugurated the temple, but mentions the deceased ruler on the monument to honour his work and devotion. On the Dedication Stone there is no mention of sacrificed subjugated peoples at all, just the rulers themselves and their respect for the Powers of Nature and the Ancestors.

This very different historical testimony from the period and the protagonists themselves compels us to critically re-examine the later colonial version. It is quite plausible that captives from the wars of Ahuizotl's imperial expansion into the State of Oaxaca were executed on the occasion of that ruler's inauguration of the Templo Mayor, but their number does not seem to have been important at the time and seems to be a later reconstruction: 4,000 and 20,000 are general round numbers in the Mesoamerican vigesimal system. Technically speaking, even the reference of the pictorial text of Codex Telleriano-Remensis is not straightforward: the actual killing of the persons is not shown, only their arrival "dressed to be sacrificed", which could be a ritual demonstration of surrender, rather than a mass execution.

66 See for example Codex Vaticanus A, f 54v, and Codex Añute (Selden), p. 8-I/II.

67 For publication and interpretation of the Dedication or Inaugural Stone see Seler, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (vol. II, 766), and Nicholson and Quiñones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico*, 52-55.

Something similar happens with the representation of sacrificial acts in the religious codices. These manuscripts have mostly mantic (divinatory) contents: the depicted acts are not descriptions of acts that are actually taking place but prognostications and warnings. In Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), p. 21, for example we see the image of a bound person (captive) being killed in a ball court. This does not register a custom of sacrificing people in ball courts but is a divinatory sign, warning that in this particular period of the calendar violent death may occur (fig. 7.10).[68]

Another interesting case is the representation of an eclipse in the last image of Codex Mictlan (Laud), p. 24. The God of Death is blowing darkness on to the precious disc of the Sun God; at the same time he is killing a white man (fig. 7.11). The scene is explained by information from early-colonial sources about the sacrifice of albinos on the occasion of an eclipse.

> When an eclipse occurred, they make great and fear-inspiring sacrifices (especially if it was a solar eclipses), because they thought that they were going to be destroyed, as they did not yet understand the secret of nature. And they searched for all the white or hairless men and women that they could find, and those they killed and sacrificed to appease the sun. With this act they seemed to recall the death of their gods by the sun… They shouted and screamed loudly at the occasion of a solar eclipse, and equally when an eclipse of the moon happened, or when they saw some other signal or comet in the sky, though not so much as in the case of an eclipse of the sun.[69]

The context of Codex Mictlan suggests, however, that the image has a mantic meaning, which, in turn, points to another possible understanding of Mendieta's colonial text. The mantic genre implies that the meaning of the image is that an eclipse (particularly in the associated time periods) is dangerous for "white and hairless men": the Death God might kill them. In the hostile interpretation by the friar – again: several decades after the end of the pre-colonial period and without a fair intercultural communication – the mantic prediction was transformed into a statement about a supposed practice, suggesting that on the occasion of an eclipse all albinos were rounded up and massacred, while in fact it was most likely a general warning for the population at large about what might happen to some people because of (divine) natural forces.

Figure 7.11 The solar eclipse as a death-bringing omen, according to Codex Mictlan (Laud), p. 24.

The image conjured by Sahagún and other colonial sources is not without consequences. It has become a pre-understanding for interpreting Mesoamerican society. Historian Matthew Restall, specialized in the matter, has very well analysed the situation:

> … the supposed evidence for characterizing Aztec life as built around rituals of slaughter and cannibalism is another example of confirmation bias… Conquistadors and Franciscans, theologians and chroniclers, all seeking to justify some aspect or another of the Spanish invasions, conquests, colonization, and campaigns of conversion, repeated the same denunciations of the Aztecs so many times that they became fact. After several generations, the distortions and lies were widely believed; there was nobody to argue against them. Even the indigenous elite, based on their contributions to Sahagún's great Historia (the Florentine Codex), seemed to believe them (after all, they were now Christians too).[70]

Ancient Mexican visual representations of the act of killing by stabbing a person in the chest are now generally immediately read as human sacrifice, without questioning, which confirms further the idea that such sacrifice was an omnipresent practice. This determines the way Mexican citizens, as well as many tourists and even modern archaeologists still look at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City and at Mesoamerican temple pyramids in general, namely that their main function was that of a place for human sacrifice. In line with this preconceived image and Cortesian lens all artefacts, found at these sites, are understood in this sense: all knives are sacrificial knives, all altars functioned for human sacrifice etc. The site museum of the Templo Mayor, the permanent exposition of Aztec culture in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, and many other archaeological exhibits in the country confirm and promote the same idea.

68 See the edition and commentary by Anders, Jansen and Reyes García, *Templos del Cielo*.

69 Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, 101.

70 Restall, *When Montezuma met Cortés*, 88-89.

Consequently many aspects of Aztec iconography are still today generally interpreted as elements of human sacrifice, which reinforces the already established stereotype. A key example is the famous statue of Coatlicue, "She with the Skirt of Serpents".[71] Her name and the presence of many serpents surrounding her are in Mesoamerican terms clearly a metaphoric image of Mother Earth, but evoke to the Christian mind associations with the devil. More specifically, she wears a necklace consisting of hearts and hands, which are in this same paradigm easily interpreted as coming from victims of human sacrifice. However a statement by friar Diego Durán, in a different context, clarifies that during the rite of the month Huey Pachtli the priests dressed in robes that were "painted and decorated with some hearts and hands (with opened handpalms), a sign that meant that with their hands and heart they asked for a good harvest, because it was already the time…" (Durán, *Ritos*: ch. 16). In other words: the necklace of hands and hearts on the Goddess symbolizes a Mesoamerican prayer.

Similarly, sculptures of skulls and other images of death, for example, are immediately supposed to refer to the killing of people in human sacrifice, but modern research suggests that such images may in fact be references to Ancestor worship, which was widespread and important in Mesoamerica.[72]

This makes us also question the meaning of the *tzompantli*, the skull rack or skull altar. On his way to Tlaxcala Bernal Díaz already noted the existence of such monuments:

> One certain spot in this township I never shall forget, situated near the temple. Here a vast number of human skulls were piled up in the best order imaginable,--there must have been more than 100,000; I repeat, more than 100,000. In like manner you saw the remaining human bones piled up in order in another corner of the square; these it would have been impossible to count. Besides these, there were human heads hanging suspended from beams on both sides. Three papas stood sentinel on this place of skulls, for which purpose, it was told us, they were particularly appointed. Similar horrible sights we saw towards the interior of the country in every township, and even in Tlascalla.[73]

The most famous *tzompantli* was standing in the Aztec capital, close to the Templo Mayor. Recently (2015) archaeologists discovered its remains. Such skull altars are often interpreted as containing the remains of those who were killed in human sacrifices. Obviously the late medieval Europeans understood this exhibition of skulls as similar to the practice in their own culture of beheading criminals or adversaries (as capital punishment) and then placing their heads on spikes. But actually it still has to be established whether this Aztec monument was indeed some triumphal display of trophy heads taken from slain enemies or if it had a different meaning, for example as a place for worship of dead Ancestors. The description of Codex Vaticanus A suggests the latter:

> This was the place where they put all the heads and skulls of the lords who had died in war… this was kept in so much reverence that they called it in their language tlatzolli tzon pantli [tlaçotli tzompantli], wich means: precious or desired death, because even the Devil wanted to have his martyrs, of which the Psalmist speaks, and had convinced them that only those who died in war were going to heaven. And unhappy those people and unlucky the souls of all those others, because they had no remedy but to go to hell, and therefore everyone wanted to die such a death. But here they put the heads of those who were killed, almost like relics, as we have those of Saints in the sanctuaries and churches.[74]

The Nahuatl expression *tlaço(tli) tzompantli* means something like "appreciated or loved place of heads". Clearly this text suggests that it preserved and exhibited the remains of loved ones, as a revered monument of relics, an altar for (collective) Ancestor worship and devotion, anticipating the present-day custom of making altars for the Days of the Dead (October 31 – November 2), which are still an important part of Mesoamerican ritual.

7.5. Ritualised execution

But if the continuity of some pre-Christian ideas and practices was the origin of the notion of witchcraft and if the preservation and worship of ancestral remains was the basis for the allegation of cannibalism in the Caribbean, what was the root element that led to the construction of the stereotype of the 'Aztec human sacrifice'? First of all, we should stress that there was indeed a form of blood sacrifice in pre-colonial Mesoamerica: self-sacrifice, *i.e.* bloodletting from ear, tongue or penis, was frequently performed according to a variety of pre-colonial and early-colonial sources.[75]

71 See Pasztory, *Aztec Art*, 157-160, and Matos Moctezuma and López Luján, *Escultura Monumental Mexica*, ch. 3.

72 See for example Fitzsimmons and Shimada, *Living with the Dead*.

73 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 61.

74 Codex Vaticanus A, f 57r.

75 Cf. Graulich, *Autosacrifice* and Davis, *Ritualized Discourse*.

In addition, the presentation of food to the images in the temple and the sacrificial killing of animals were common, particularly the decapitation of quails. The custom of sacrificing chicken, for example, remains a prominent element of present-day Mesoamerican religion.[76] These were well-known acts to pay respect to the Gods; they were also related to fasting and visionary experiences.

The pre-colonial Mixtec pictorial manuscripts typically portray the protagonists of their historical narratives as carrying out bloodletting with agave spines or bone perforators, as well as decapitating quails (generally in combination with throwing ground tobacco in the air as an offering), but the famous, emblematic human sacrifice is conspicuously lacking. If rulers such as Motecuhzoma would indeed have insisted so fervently on making sacrifices, as Cortés and Bernal Díaz claim, one would expect the pre-colonial sources (codices, sculptures etc.) to portray them carrying out such actions, but this is not the case. It is therefore more likely that Motecuhzoma was actually insisting on his ritual obligation of bloodletting and sacrifice of quails and/or other animals. But such distinctions were "lost in translation".

But what then about the killing of persons by cutting out their hearts? We find this act represented in pre-colonial manuscripts and other visual art – but how sure are we that it actually was a "human sacrifice"? Clearly it had a religious aspect. The association with temples and statues of the local deities – "demons" according to the medieval Christian worldview – sufficed for the Spaniards as evidence for a connection with the devil. This was the reason that Cortés and the earliest Spanish authors already spoke of it as "sacrifice" and connected it directly with "idolatry", but, as we discussed above, they were mentally conditioned by earlier fanciful accounts of cannibals and witches. On the other hand, the pre-colonial codices demonstrate that this act was not usually part of the native representation of the rituals of the royal persona. Likely there was an element of offering, but this was not the total or primary function or exclusive intrinsic meaning of the killing. What we do find in relation to dynastic history, however, is the slaying of adversaries as a sign of the glorious and victorious character of the ruler. When we try to avoid the colonial gaze and ideological statements about this custom, and focus on the other, more mundane, references, dispersed in different sources, another image emerges. The *Relación Geográfica* of Tequizistlan states:

> They venerated the idol Huitzilopochtli and every 80 days they sacrificed to him the Indians that had been condemned to death because of crimes that they had committed.[77]

The *Relación Geográfica* of Teotihuacan (ibid. 236-237) tells us about a temple or altar in front of the Pyramid of the Moon, where wrongdoers and criminals were executed. An example is given: adults who had stolen clothes, feathers, precious stones or other valuable commodities, incurred the death penalty if the stolen good was not returned; but if it was returned, they became slaves for the rest of their lives. Also captives taken in war were killed here, but if they were able to escape before being killed and could climb the temple pyramid they were set free.

There is also an example in the Codex Añute (Selden), an early colonial Mixtec manuscript that is completely painted in pre-colonial tradition. This pictographic book recounts the history of the indigenous dynasty that ruled the city-state ("the mat, the throne") of Añute, now Magdalena Jaltepec in the Mixteca Alta (in the Mexican State of Oaxaca).[78] At a certain moment, in the Year 13 Rabbit (1090 CE), the princess Lady 6 Monkey 'Power of the Plumed Serpent' was going to marry a prince of another town. When she passed by the ancient ruins of Monte Albán two priests shouted to her words from afar: "knife, knife". In accordance with Mixtec custom Lady 6 Monkey interpreted these words as a curse and a threat. With the help of her guiding Goddess she took revenge: supported by an army of warriors she attacked the dwelling of these priests in Monte Albán and took both men prisoner. She then had one killed in her own town, Añute, and the other in the town of her future husband: in both cases the victim was stretched over an altar in the temple court and his heart was cut out (fig. 7.12). Clearly, this was a capital punishment of men who had dared to threaten the princess, in other words: an execution of wrongdoers (Codex Añute, pp. 7-8).

Another example is the murder of Lord 8 Deer, which is represented in a similar manner: Lord 8 Deer is stretched out over an altar and someone is stabbing a flint knife into his chest. In a cognate scene someone is stabbing Lord 8 Deer while he is asleep. The analysis of the context demonstrates that in this case we are not dealing with a sacrifice but with a planned assassination. At a distance

76 For example among the Ayuuk people in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico (see Rojas Martínez Gracida, *Tiempo y Sabiduría* y Reyes Gómez, *Tiempo, Espacio y Religión.*

77 Acuña, *Relaciones Geográficas,* vol. 7, 242; The *Relaciones Geográficas* were brief sketches of the situation of the different villages, written for the Spanish authorities around 1580. See Isaac, *Cannibalism among Aztecs*, for a study of the references to anthropophagy in these sources.

78 See our photographic edition and commentary of this codex (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Historia, literatura e ideología*).

Figure 7.12 (reading from bottom upwards, first row left to right, second row right to left) Lady 6 Monkey takes two men prisoner in battle and has them executed at two different locations, according to Codex Añute (Selden), p. 9. After: Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Historia, literatura e ideología.*

Lord 4 Wind is watching; he raises in his hand the sign 'stick and stone', a couplet meaning "punishment".[79] Lord 4 Wind is taking revenge here on Lord 8 Deer for having killed his father and mother. This case shows that the act of heart extraction on an altar is just a pictographic convention for stating that someone is killed.

In accordance with Mesoamerican worldview we understand that taking a life was an act that could only be undertaken with religious respect for the divine forces that had created life in the first place. That explains why the killing was carried out in a ritualised manner, or at least represented that way. The form was similar to that of killing a hunted animal: cutting out the heart as centre of animic power and offering it to the Gods.[80] The palpitating human heart – seat and principle of life – was respectfully returned to the hands and mouths of the (sculptures of the) Creators, who in this way "ate" the killed person. In a similar vein, the Gods drank the blood offered by humans in self-sacrifice and Mother Earth "ate" the body of the deceased that was buried. Indeed there was an awareness of the interdependence of human individuals and the forces of nature, mutually maintaining and nurturing each other, but this was a religious context and paradigm for the (representation of the) way in which someone was killed, not a prime motivation for that killing.

Thinking about the above-mentioned scene in in Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), in which the cutting of a tree was painted as a "human sacrifice", we furthermore become aware of the possibility that the heart extraction was not a realistic representation of the act itself but a pictographic image that was to be read as "taking out the life of someone (and returning it to the deities)".[81] An already prejudiced Spanish inquisitor would have understood such idiomatic or metaphorical expressions in Mesoamerican languages, leading to those seemingly realistic representations in visual art, as further proof that such sacrifices of hearts had indeed occurred. In view of the fact that the extraction of a human heart with an obsidian or flint knife implies drastic anatomical and technical difficulties, we should, however, consider the alternative possibility that the person was killed by the act of just stabbing the knife into the chest, without the heart itself being removed.

79 See Codex Ñuu Tnoo – Ndisi Nuu (Bodley), p. 14-I, and Codex Iya Nacuaa I (Colombino), p. 16-II, respectively. For a detailed commentary on the life-story of Lord 8 Deer, see Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Encounter with the Plumed Serpent*.

80 See about this connection the erudite monograph of Olivier, *Cacería, sacrificio y poder.*

81 See Hassler's analysis in *Menschenopfer*, 201-213). The same is true for flaying, which likely also had a symbolical aspect (*ibid.* 215-217).

7.6. Conclusion

It is easy to see how in the eyes of non-informed hostile outsiders the (incidental) acts of ritualised killing were convoluted with the customary bloodletting and with the sacrifice of animals: the early colonial sources do not clearly distinguish between them. Consequently, the frequency of the bloodletting ritual could be projected onto the ritualised death penalties and executions, so that a propagandistic image of continuous cruel butchering could be constructed. This representation of the indigenous world as a set of irrational, horrible and inhuman practices served the political interests of the colonial authors to justify the colonial invasion and conquest. When we review and deconstruct that representation in critical retrospect, we find several possible alternative interpretations: the blood in the temples observed by the Spaniards, for example, may well have been that of self-sacrifice and/or that of sacrificed quails and other animals, while the human corpses they encountered probably belonged to executed criminals or war captives.

In this context we also understand that persons sentenced to death were imprisoned in expectation of an adequate ritual event. This explains that the Spaniards encountered persons locked up in wooden cages. Typically they considered this imprisonment as a way of fattening the victims for cannibalistic consumption (analogous to the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel).

> I have still to mention that in Tlascalla we found houses built of wood, in the shape of cages, in which numbers of Indians, of both sexes, were confined, and fattened for their sacrifices and feasts. We never hesitated a single moment to break them down and liberate the prisoners.[82]

> The kind reader has now, no doubt, heard enough of this occurrence at Cholulla, and I myself would gladly break off here, but must add a word or two about the wooden cages we saw in this town. These were constructed of heavy timber, and filled with grown-up men and little boys, who were fattening there for the sacrifices and feasts. These diabolical cages Cortes ordered to be pulled down, and sent the prisoners each to their several homes. He likewise made the chiefs and papas promise him, under severe threats, never again to fasten up human beings in that way, and totally to abstain from eating human flesh.[83]

In a similar sense the cited statement of the *Relación Geográfica* of Teotihuacan that those who had stolen something but returned it in time became "slaves" suggests that "slavery" (or rather obligatory service) functioned as a sort of probation status. Indeed, several accounts state that slaves could be sacrificed, *i.e.* could be killed if their probation period was evaluated negatively, or whenever there was another socially accepted reason. For example, some Mesoamerican societies may have had the custom of killing servants or captives as well as spouses or other specific family members to accompany a deceased important person – master, conqueror, lineage head or ruler – to accompany him/her to the Afterlife to take care of him/her there.[84]

Thus, we conclude, the killing of human individuals through extracting or rather perforating the heart was indeed part of Aztec and other ancient Mesoamerican cultures. Looking at the contextual data we understand that the "human sacrifice" was primarily a form of death penalty for criminals or a way of executing enemies that had been taken captive in battle. We do not propose to idealize or sublimate such practices, but we do propose that what was called "human sacrifice" by the Spaniards was actually a form of ritualised execution or capital punishment, which, in terms of cultural logic and ethics, is obviously something quite different, as such an act is realised in accordance with social norms and a juridical system of laws. In fact, such executions would not have served the conquistadors' purpose of justifying the colonial invasion, as they were also common practice throughout Europe.

The interpretation of the so-called "human sacrifice" as execution or capital punishment also implies that, though the killing of criminals and enemies would not have been uncommon in ancient Mesoamerica, it occurred most likely on a much smaller scale than the numbers mentioned by the colonial authors suggest. The reputed accompanying acts of cannibalism most probably were, as in the Caribbean, fanciful horror stories, which may have been inspired by misunderstood funerary practices, involving secondary burials and the veneration of ancestral bones as sacred relics.[85]

Violence unfortunately has been and still is part of all civilizations in the world. Mass killings have been with us since the expanding kingdoms of the ancient Near East. The Romans had their mad emperors, their fatal gladiator combats and their mass crucifixions, Medieval Europe

82 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 78, 1844, 187.

83 Díaz del Castillo, *Memoirs*, ch. 83, 1844, 207.

84 Such a custom is mentioned in several Spanish accounts and would explain, for example, the presence of primary burials in an antechamber of a tomb, which apparently accompany the main primary burial in the chamber – see the case of Tombs 1 and 2 in Zaachila (Gallegos, *Señor 9 Flor*). This needs to be investigated further.

85 See our study of Tomb 7 of Monte Albán, which contained such relics as sacred bundles: Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *Time and the Ancestors*.

its torture, public burnings at the stake, beheadings, flaying, and other forms of cruel execution. Witch-hunt, colonisation and slavery are further reminders of the abuses that European nations were capable of. The past hundred years with two world wars, the Holocaust, atom bombs, civil wars, ethnic "cleansing", genocides, precision bombardments, terrorist attacks, and state terrorism, among others, suggest that the proportions of violence against innocent civilians are only increasing, in spite of consistent efforts to bring about peace and respect for human rights. It is therefore not strange to find acts of violence, war and manslaughter as part of imperial expansion in ancient Mesoamerica. Externally the violence was directed against enemy populations and their leaders, internally it imposed "law and order" through the punishment of individuals who had behaved against the established norms of the state. When the Spaniards arrived, the Aztec expansion had reached its apogee, causing numerous attacks, battles, raids, and ambushes, which probably raised the number of war captives that had to be executed. At the same time the very arrival of the conquistadors likely contributed to a general atmosphere of crisis, lawlessness and desperation, leading to an intensification of bloodshed.

It was in this dramatic context that the hostile colonial commentators constructed the image of human sacrifice and cannibalism as generalized ancient and fanatic practices of pagan peoples. They followed the template of Greek and Latin authors as well as of Biblical and other Christian texts, which presented human sacrifice as characteristic of remote "other peoples", "barbarians", whom they condemned and from whom they distanced themselves. Calling the execution of humans a "sacrifice" they implied that the primary objective of killing in that pagan and barbarian society was devil-worship: in their opinion it was a bloody and cruel act of a primitive superstitious religion, which imposed on people the need to continuously and irrationally slaughter innocent victims to feed bloodthirsty Gods, and eat the bodies themselves. In this way the European colonisers effectively satanised "the other" as a way of justifying their own violent invasion.

Even today this tendentious image is with us as a *topos* that makes it possible to present the indigenous civilization as monumental and impressive on the one hand, but as fundamentally barbaric and cruel on the other, *i.e.* as interesting to exploit for the macabre fascinations of a large national and international audience and for the tourist industry, but at the same time as something that is alien and something of the remote past that should be overcome. Clearly, this image corresponds to the double mentality, commonplace in Mexico, of admiring and praising the great civilization of the past while at the same time oppressing and discriminating the descendant communities, the indigenous peoples, in the present.[86]

What is needed now is an in-depth historical critique and deconstruction of the sources and data so that we may break with the tradition of taking the reports of Cortés, Bernal Díaz, Sahagún, Durán and other colonial authors at face value, and, instead, start looking for possible alternative interpretations. Only when the colonial gaze and biases are removed can we start to truly appreciate the religious values and symbolism that are present in ancient Mesoamerican art and in the living heritage of indigenous communities today.

86 See Pérez and Jansen, *Códices y Conciencia*, and Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo*.

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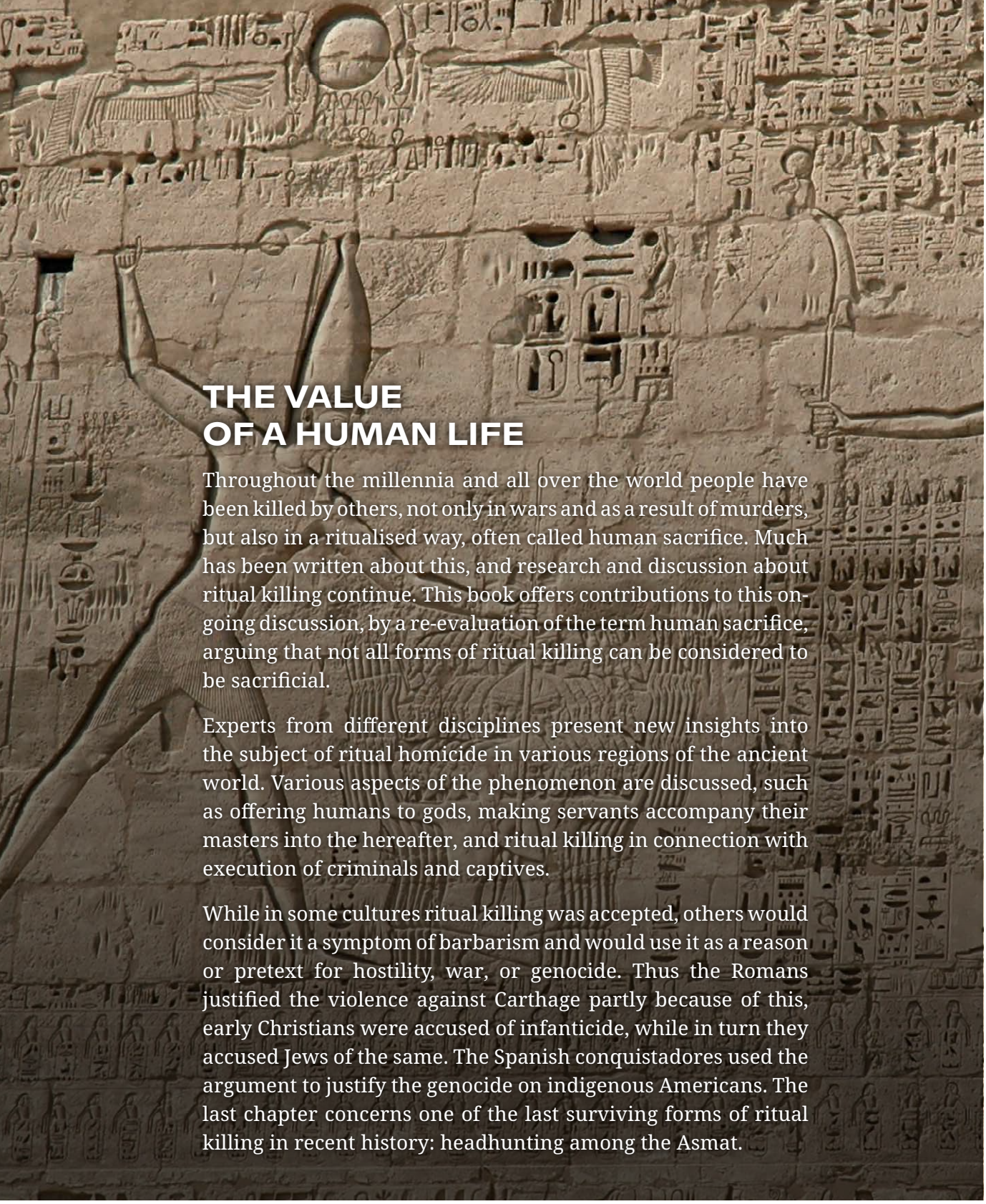

THE VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE

Throughout the millennia and all over the world people have been killed by others, not only in wars and as a result of murders, but also in a ritualised way, often called human sacrifice. Much has been written about this, and research and discussion about ritual killing continue. This book offers contributions to this on-going discussion, by a re-evaluation of the term human sacrifice, arguing that not all forms of ritual killing can be considered to be sacrificial.

Experts from different disciplines present new insights into the subject of ritual homicide in various regions of the ancient world. Various aspects of the phenomenon are discussed, such as offering humans to gods, making servants accompany their masters into the hereafter, and ritual killing in connection with execution of criminals and captives.

While in some cultures ritual killing was accepted, others would consider it a symptom of barbarism and would use it as a reason or pretext for hostility, war, or genocide. Thus the Romans justified the violence against Carthage partly because of this, early Christians were accused of infanticide, while in turn they accused Jews of the same. The Spanish conquistadores used the argument to justify the genocide on indigenous Americans. The last chapter concerns one of the last surviving forms of ritual killing in recent history: headhunting among the Asmat.

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